

No Place I'd Rather Be by **theamiableanachronism**

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Summary: An early summer fic in which rocks and hearts do triple skips across the lake.

No Place I'd Rather Be

The wind was blowing her hair around her ears—in just a few short months it had already gotten so long—and into her eyes. She frowned and blew it away with a puff of air from her lips and adjusted her stance in the calf-high waters, further dampening the cuffs of the pants she'd hurriedly rolled up before wading in. There were already nine long flat rocks littering the bottom of the lake at varying distances, all failed attempts to achieve the long-awaited, and at this point what felt like mythical, triple skip.

Mike couldn't do anything but watch from the shore, keeping watch over the bicycles they'd left lying in the sand, the chrome on El's new handlebars glinting in the afternoon sunlight. It wasn't as if he could show her how to do it: he could barely throw a rock in the direction he wanted to on dry land. That he would have the coordination to not only throw it across a body of open water but to arc it in such a way that it bounced on the surface was laughable.

El was doing marginally better than he would have expected himself to do, despite the frustrated frown etched deeply between her eyebrows, and of course he was in awe of her for that. He'd gotten used to the fact that pretty much everything El did left him amazed.

Summer had officially started yesterday, but the Party had been celebrating since practically the minute the last bell of the school year rang. They'd frequented this lake, all six of them, swimming in it, watching it during picnics cobbled together from snacks scavenged out of the bottom of their backpacks. More than a few water balloon fights had taken place on its shores and if Mike looked closely he could still see tiny bits of colorful rubber, the debris of battle left behind despite their conscientious foraging.

But today was different. Much as he and El loved their friends, there was a different kind of companionship shared just between them that no matter how hard they tried, the others couldn't offer them. So they carved out time to spend together, just the two of them. Days when the others had things to do so they could avoid any jokes about "lovebirds" or "honeymoons". Not telling anyone where or when they were going usually did the trick.

So far, these days had been dreamlike. Mike kept pinching himself: was this really happening? Getting to spend hours on end with the one girl in the world he thought he would never see again for even a few minutes? The bruises along his arms were painful but they were proof that this was no dream: El was really standing there, they really had spent more than one day like this, quiet and peaceful, holding hands and talking about everything and nothing. It was all real.

The sun was slowly reddening El's pale face and gently bleaching her brown hair, to the point where in direct sunlight, certain strands gleamed gold. It looked in all seriousness like a halo had settled around her head, which Mike found extremely fitting, his heart twisting in his chest and shortening his breath.

El chose that specific moment of realization to turn around and frown at him. It didn't diminish the effect and he had to remind himself to pay attention to the words she was saying.

"Where's your rock?"

"I don't have one."

"Why?"

"I can't do that," he said, gesturing vaguely from her to the lake.

She rested one fist on her hip, her other hand hefting the eleventh, maybe twelfth stone. "Neither can I." She scanned the sand then pointed to a rock. "Try that one."

Mike scrambled to his feet, brushing sand off the backs of his calves, not bothering to squelch the grin spreading on his face under El's pseudo-stern glare. "Okay, fine, I'm doing it."

He scooped up the rock—a smooth black one that perfectly fit into his large palm—then looked at El. "What do I do?"

El shrugged and thrust her arm out in an arc over the lake. "Like that."

Mike mimed her, slowly. "Like that?"

"Mm-hm."

"Okay." He threw his stone and it landed a few feet away, descending beneath the waves with a disappointing sploosh. He watched El out the corner of his eye. She stared at where his rock had fallen, eyes narrowed analytically. Guiltily, he thought how much like a scientist she looked, a comparison he wouldn't dare voice to her.

But then she shrugged. "Mine do that too." She threw her rock out—much farther than Mike's—but it landed in much the same way, though with a much more impressive splash. She'd had more momentum on her side. She squinted again in response then leaned down to pick up another rock, regarding it for a brief moment.

Then she tossed it into the air. It froze there, gently rotating, until suddenly, it whizzed out across the lake, becoming a tiny speck in the distance before hitting the surface of the water once, twice, three times in succession.

The triple skip.

Mike's jaw dropped and he turned to El to find a smile curving her lips. His heart mimicked the rock and skipped three times, only it kept right on going; he guessed it was setting some kind of record.

"You did it!"

El glanced at him and smiled before returning her gaze to the waves at her feet. Huge ripples were making their way to her ankles and she watched them quietly, her hair falling in gentle waves across her cheekbones. A comfortable silence settled over them and Mike took his opportunity.

"Are... are you having a good summer, El?"

At first she didn't answer, and though he knew sometimes she took time to piece together her carefully chosen words, he couldn't help but worry that the answer was no.

Finally, she looked up and out across the lake. Another gust of warm air tossed her hair and his breath hitched in his chest. She took in a deep breath, as if she were trying to fill herself up with the sweet

summer wind, and then looked at him, her eyes warm.

"Yes. I am."

Something broke in him and he couldn't tell if it was just relief or the fear that she was only saying it to be nice. "Really?"

Another smile and she nodded again, taking his hand in hers. "Really."

As usual, feeling her hand in his eased the anxiety bubbling in his chest. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze as thanks and it prompted her to rest her head against his shoulder, though with how much he'd been growing, it was more against his upper arm than his shoulder. But it didn't matter. Having her close by, feeling the pump of her heartbeat underneath his fingers, her nearness a testament to the fact that she was real, was enough.